

Ready for some rockabilly?

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BY CATHLEEN NORMAN
prespub@earthlink.net

No longer a throwback to the distant '50s, rockabilly has roused Denver – stirring a strong following for the dynamic bands re-creating the music with the traditional three-piece arrangement of upright bass, guitar and drums, as well as adventuring into creative new territory. Described as blues plus country with Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash thrown in, the fast-paced music evokes fast cars and living on the edge.

“Rockabilly was primitive,” said Mike Olafson, producer of *Gears, Grease and Guitars*, a film about Denver’s rockabilly scene and the 1950s-60s car culture. “It was the beginning rumblings of rock ‘n’ roll.”

Elvis Presley birthed the sound in 1954, when he recorded “That’s Alright, Mama” at Sun Records in Memphis and earned himself the nickname *Hillbilly Cat*. Johnny Cash jumped aboard the rockabilly bandwagon, recording *Rockabilly Blues* in 1955. The break-neck sound caught on swiftly across the country, fueled by America’s car culture with its drag races and custom vehicles chopped and channeled for speed.

Rockabilly and auto racing zoomed into Denver. The Denver Timing Association formed in 1948. People pieced together racecars from junkyards.

“I make my plan as I build the car,” said one rodster. “I do a lot of work with the parts.”

By 1957, Denver had 50 car clubs, including the Dragons, the Chevrons, Piston Pushers and the Strippers. Hod-rodders raced in timed drag races on the Valley Highway, today’s Interstate 25. They cruised Colfax Avenue and down Broadway and sometimes up to the Grubstake Saloon in Central City.

It was an era of pin-up girls, radio music and working on self-built racecars. Rockabilly thrived as a working man’s music with a lickety split pace – edgy at a time when many popular bands featured languid lyrics, soaring violins and swaying back-up singers in long chiffon dresses.



Rockabilly experts, GT and the Sidewinders at the Skylark Lounge. Photos by Cathleen Norman.



Hot Rods and Rockabilly are featured at the mid-August Hillbilly Ho Down in Colorado Springs.

Rockabilly songs released in 1956 included *Folsom Prison Blues* by Johnny Cash, *Blue Suede Shoes* by Carl Perkins, *Heartbreak Hotel* by Elvis Presley, *See You Later Alligator* by [Roy Hall](#) and *Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On* by the Commodores. Hundreds, if not thousands, of musicians recorded in the rockabilly style during the music’s five-year reign.

By 1960, rockabilly was running out of gas. Regarded as rough around the edges, it was pushed aside by softer, safer tunes of Frankie Avalon and Fabian. The stand-up bass faded from fashion too, pushed out of service by invention of the electric bass guitar that was louder, more versatile and much more portable.

The rockabilly sound resurfaced in the mid-60s as “surfabilly” with its persistent rhythm guitar captivated American teen-agers in love with Hawaii and the California coast. But for the most part, the rockabilly genre became regarded as old-fashioned.

A generation later, the Stray Cats strutted onto the music scene. These

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rockabilly revivalists from England popularized the sound in America, and Coloradans Chuck Hughes and Lance Bakemeyer jumped onto the ride in 1983, launching their band Hillbilly Hellcats. Still Denver's signature rockabilly band, the Hellcats steadily remain in the top 10 of U.S. rockabilly bands.

According to bass player Bakemeyer, the band has sold more than 50,000 of their two self-produced CDs, as well as 500,000 songs downloaded from the Internet. Rather than traditional rockabilly, Bakemeyer calls the Hellcat's music "neobilly" – faster than the original style with contemporary lyrics that spin stories of skateboarders and hippies, as well as white trash, whiskey and trailer parks.

During their lengthy musical career, the Hillbilly Hellcats have played Colorado venues large and small, from 5,000 people at the Carbondale Mountain Music Festival to 50 folks at the Tommyknocker in Creede; the band also has toured the U.S. and Europe.



Jonny Barber, also performing as "Velvet Elvis" at the Skylark Lounge.

"The rockabilly scene is much bigger in England and Europe," said Bakemeyer.

The Hellcats have also played several times at Viva Las Vegas in Nevada, the country's largest annual rockabilly event.

From the mid 1990s into the early 2000s, rockabilly got a boost in Denver from several sources. Curt Olan, now a Westminster high school coach, staged several rockabilly festivals. As many as 200 people turned up at night clubs and car shows at various Front Range venues, dressed in '50s fashion and cruising up in vintage cars. Denverite Willie Lewis launched his Rock-A-Billy label, further invigorating the sound. Mike Olafson began work on *Grease, Gears and Guitars*, produced in 2007 by Vintage Venture Media. The Skylark Lounge on South Broadway, with its vintage interior of horseshoe-shaped bar, tall chrome-legged barstools and black-and-white tile floor provided the video venue for many of the rockabilly bands featured in the film.

Nowadays, rockabilly fans have several choices of band and venues. Jonny Barber and the Rhythm Razors deliver consistent rockabilly favorites. As "Velvet Elvis," lead singer Jonny Barber also re-creates the original inventor of rockabilly. The singer not only looks and sounds incredibly like the Great One, but also nurtures a reverence and respect for Elvis that even sent Jonny to Memphis to visit with Larry Geller – Elvis's hairdresser and spiritual adviser. Velvet Elvis performs at private parties and local venues, recently the Colorado Burlesque Festival.

GT and the Sidewinders rival Jonny Barber for charisma, especially with lead singer's GT's Elvis sideburns and white "wife beater" sleeveless T-shirt. The trio does justice to acoustic traditional rockabilly with the old-school upright slap-style bass – sometimes tossing in Merle Haggard and Hank Williams favorites – as well as the electrified version of classics and self-written tunes.

Rockabilly also incorporates other genres.

"You can throw a lot of things in the mix. It's conducive to any idea," said Hellcats' Bakemeyer.

His current side project, the Calf Branders, combines rockabilly and honky tonk with witty lyrics.

Another version, psychobilly, emerged in Europe in the '80s influenced by punk rock and epitomized by the southern California band Social Distortion. Edgy regulars in Denver that stray toward psychobilly include: Slim Cessna's Auto Club who toss in pedal steel guitar, banjos and piano; Reverend Horton Heat with a high-octane trio of stand-up bass, guitar and drums; Get Three Coffins Ready with strident surfabilly guitar; and SplitLip Rayfield with his signature guitar crafted from a 1978 Mercury Grand Marquis gas tank, a piece of hickory wood and strung with one piece of Weedwhacker line.

Meanwhile, the rockabilly subculture still calls for dressing up. Everybody wants to be Fonzy – men roll up their jeans, attach their wallets with chains and pack of cigarettes rolled up in their white T-shirt sleeves. Women sport smooth flared hair, fluffy skirts and stiletto heels. Today, both sexes sport acres of "ink" – lots of tattoos.

"People like the old classic music," said Scott Heron, the owner of the Skylark. "They're trying to re-create something they never lived through. Everyone is trying to be a hood or a bad guy. No more poodle skirts..."

Johnny Odde, whose [Ghost Train Productions](#) schedules rockabilly bands in various Denver venues, said,

“It’s good time music. It’s about having fun.”

Fortune Valley Casino regularly hosts nationally popular rockabilly, such as Deke Dickerson and Big Sandy and his Fly-Rite Boys, as well as Denver’s Redline Rockets.



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Chuck Hughes July 27, 2010 at 2:35 am



On behalf of all the fans and related bands in Denver’s scene, thanks for the recognition, Cathleen. This article gives the uninitiated a very good explanation and hopefully will bring some more folks to join the fun.

Ricky Dean Haffey August 2, 2010 at 5:46 pm



Thanks for the nod, Ms. Norman. Roots music needs all the help it can get around here. Not sure if you were saving the best for last, but the Redline Rockets appreciate being the last word in Rockabilly!

Brooklyn March 6, 2011 at 11:58 am



I am writing a research paper for Sociology and would love to speak to dynamite Don of Brethren fast, tell him his old friend need some first hand information about the whole rockabilly scene.

editorial March 9, 2011 at 4:28 pm



I’ll pass along your request Brooklyn! Thanks
- Colorado Gambler

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